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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000119

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TAGS: PREL PINR KPAQ MARR ASEC AG

SUBJECT: INITIAL SCANDAL REACTIONS RESTRAINED, LONGER-TERM
IMPACT UNCERTAIN

REF: A. ALGIERS 106
1B. ALGIERS 107
1C. ALGIERS 113

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Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b, d and g).

11. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Although initial public and government reaction to the ABC News story regarding misconduct by a former Embassy officer (refs A and B) has been polite and restrained, the medium-term impact on our image and public outreach activities may be linked to how the judicial process plays out. We will have to closely monitor media trends, government signals and public reaction for months. The perception that proper legal actions have been taken thus far by the USG appears to have done much to satisfy the initial concerns of our official contacts. The government took steps to manage the fallout of the story and immediately underscored the importance of key areas of bilateral cooperation, particularly security and counter-terrorism. Overall official and public reactions thus far have painted the incident as unfortunate and embarrassing but primarily a legal matter being addressed by the relevant U.S. authorities, and not an incident that would impact the substance or quality of bilateral relations. Privately, senior security contacts have indicated that counter-terrorism cooperation will go on. At the same time, however, some have made plain their unhappiness about not being forewarned, as well as their hope, in the interest of managing the domestic fallout, that there will be equal media attention for any punishment that may result. END SUMMARY.

FEBRUARY 2: PRESS COVERAGE CONTINUES

12. (S/NF) The three or four outlets covering the story on February 2 featured sensational headlines but were short on new substance. As the Embassy sticks closely to the Department-approved press guidance, those papers continuing to run stories are forced to use information already in the public domain, or to use the story as a hook for reporting ancillary information. For example, stories on February 2 used the alleged incidents as a vehicle to describe the book authored by the officer in question, to report on investigations possibly taking place in Egypt involving the same officer, and to cover comments from marginal party leaders who briefly ranted regarding the incidents but then launched into longer diatribes against the government and the upcoming presidential elections. The French-language daily Liberte ran a page-two story called "Dangerous Liaisons,"

which used the alleged incidents to comment on what it described as the delicate and sometimes stormy relations between Algerian political leaders and foreign missions to Algeria, and between the government and international NGOs. The piece recounted incidents in the past including perceived tensions in the media between former Ambassador Ford and then-prime minister Belkhadam that were widely reported last year, and the restriction of a German NGO's activities in October, 2008.

OFFICIAL REACTIONS RESTRAINED, STRESS COOPERATION

13. (S/NF) Algerian officials have limited their public comments and have yet to release an official government statement. Algerian Ambassador to the U.S. Abdallah Baali was widely quoted as saying that the alleged incidents are "unfortunate," but that they should not affect bilateral relations, and that Algeria is keen on pursuing a cooperative relationship with the United States. Baali said publicly that he was reassured that the USG is fully investigating the matter and that he "has faith in the U.S. authorities" to prosecute the alleged perpetrator if a case is established. Foreign Minister Medelci was quoted January 31 in the French-language daily *Algerie News* as saying simply, "we are following the developments of the case." Interior Minister Noureddine Zerhouni provided the most expansive official public comment on the incident on the margins of the closing session of Parliament January 31. According to Arab-language and French-language print media, Zerhouni said "this CIA agent played an important role in fighting terrorism in collaboration with Algerian intelligence." Zerhouni noted that the officer in question has diplomatic immunity, and thus, Algeria cannot pursue a criminal case against him here.

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He added for emphasis that the complainants in the case were of "foreign nationalities," and did not file a legal complaint with the Algerian justice system, but rather, pursued the matter through the USG. As to the allegations of assault, Zerhouni opined that the officer in question may have wanted to recruit the two women, or he simply could be "sick or not normal sexually."

14. (S/NF) The Arabic-language daily *El Bilad* on February 1 quoted an anonymous Algerian official who expanded on Zerhouni's comments, trying to reduce speculation about the presence of the CIA in Algeria. The official was quoted as saying, "the incident cannot cause a deterioration in bilateral relations between the U.S. and Algeria; post-September 11 relations have been excellent, reflecting the increased cooperation between the services of both countries. People familiar with the nature of the security relationship between Algiers and Washington do not hide the fact that the CIA has played an increasingly large role in recent years and has collected a huge amount of information on Al Qa'ida and AQIM thanks to the Algerian experience in fighting terrorism."

PRIVATE SIGNALS MORE MIXED

15. (S/NF) Privately, most government contacts dismissed any suggestion that the incident would have an impact on working-level relationships. One Algerian Army major told staff from our Office of Security Cooperation (OSC) at a previously scheduled meeting that "this type of incident happens everywhere; it is only front-page news because the CIA was implicated." Local police contacts told RSO that their cooperation will continue and that there have been "no reports of unusual activity or particular interest in the case." On January 31, the MFA's deputy director of diplomatic privileges, Abdelaziz Djafri, contacted us to request the names of the victims who made the allegations, explaining that they had yet to file their complaint with the Algerian authorities. We conveyed our talking points on the

case to Djafri to which he only responded, "you're not going to be able to give me the names then?" During a January 31 meeting with the Ambassador, Professor Ali Mabroukine would not be drawn out on the issue and quickly changed the subject by touting the new Obama administration as a new opportunity for U.S.- Algerian relations. In a February 2 meeting with the Ambassador, Senator Mohieddine Ammimour did not even raise the issue, and instead began the encounter by congratulating us on the election of President Obama, calling it a lesson in democracy for the whole world.

¶6. (S/NF) Senior security contacts have indicated privately that counter-terrorism cooperation will go on. At the same time, however, some have made plain their unhappiness about not being forewarned, as well as their hope, in the interest of managing domestic fallout here, that there will be equal media attention for any punishment that may eventually result.

PUBLIC REACTION UNCERTAIN

¶7. (S/NF) Thus far, Algerian public reaction has been harder to gauge, apart from the outrage cum cynicism of press commentary and blogs. Our staff reported that some Algerians had expressed their surprise and concern that the CIA had an official presence in Algeria with the knowledge of their government. Some of our staff also said that some family members have shown concern for the welfare of female Embassy employees given the nature of the alleged incident, which has offended their relatives' moral sensibilities. On-line message board postings have followed a similar pattern (ref C), but also contain numerous postings chastising the accusers themselves for their bad judgment and impropriety. Some bloggers even praised the USG for exhibiting transparency in its handling of the case, pointing to it as an example that the Algerian government could learn from. Presidential candidate Moussa Touati stated that the scandal presents more of a legal issue dealing with sovereignty and diplomatic immunity than an opportunity for political debate. Columnist Chawki Amari used the story on February 1 as a metaphor for what he called the "rape" of the Algerian constitution during the November 2008 amendment process,

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adding that "unfortunately, the constitution could not file a complaint with the authorities." More ominously, his online column on February 2 included incendiary quotes he said he obtained from average Algerians, including calls for Algerians in the U.S. to commit retaliatory acts of violence against American women, and for protests against the U.S. Embassy. We have yet to see any organized or widespread calls for action of this nature.

COMMENT: POSSIBLE LONG-TERM FALLOUT

¶8. (S/NF) Given the clear intent of the government to play down its potential embarrassment at the story, and based on the reaction to the story so far, we do not predict any overt or tangible immediate effect on our programs. Interior Minister Zerhouni's comments to the press were a clear signal that the government is looking to limit public debate on the issue. But while the government is clearly making an effort to manage the story, it is too early to judge the ultimate impact on Algerian public opinion. It is probably safe to say that it will be months before we will be able to make any kind of accurate assessment. Algerians do not forget, and many - including our security contacts - have said they will be following the evolution of the story closely, expecting it to resurface on the front pages with any new developments in the U.S. and/or Egypt. The best we can hope for is that attention will continue to focus on the transparency of the U.S. judicial system, particularly in comparison to the frustration ordinary Algerians feel about the lack of judicial recourse in their own country. Perceived positive

U.S. steps in the region over time may mitigate any lingering negative effects. By corollary, we would expect the issue would also resurface quickly and reinforce any public reaction to perceived negative U.S. steps in the area.

PEARCE